DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 294 178 CS 211 155

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TITLE A Voice of One's Own: Creating Writing Identities.
PUB DATE Mar 88
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (39th, St. Louis, MO, March 17-19, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; Creative Writing; Higher Education; Literature; *Personal Narratives; Questionnaires; Reader Response; Reader Text Relationship; Reading Writing Relationship; Self Concept; Student Writing Models; Teaching Methods; *Writing Instruction; Writing Processes
IDENTIFIERS Personal Experiences; *Voice (Rhetoric); *Writing Strategies

ABSTRACT

The ability to infuse language with qualities of the human voice in the act of speaking is what distinguishes autobiography as a genre and makes it most suited to teaching students subtle features inherent in the complex act of writing. When students write from personal experience, they consciously begin to shape their identities in one direction or another. Autobiography offers the potential to tap rich resources and to establish valuable relationships between the young writer's emerging sense of self and the rhetorical structures he or she encounters in reading and writing. Writing teachers can assist in this development of each writer's sense of self, and consequent development of voice, through open-ended invention strategies such as a 12-part autobiographical questionnaire or a 10-part questionnaire eliciting personal responses to literature. As examination of student writing samples shows, writing from and about the self enables student writers to begin to distinguish their voices from those of other members of interpretive communities. (ARH)

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# A Voice of One's Own: Creating Writing Identities

> "Words mean more than what is set down on paper. It takes the human voice to infuse them with the shades of deeper meaning."
>
> Maya Angelou, I Know Why The Caged Bird Sings

That ability to "infuse" language with qualities of the human voice in the act of speaking is what distinguishes autobiography as a genre and makes it most suited to teaching students subtle features inherent in the complex act of writing. Indeed, it is the self-conscious projection into the text of the speaking self that separates the autobiographer's voice from the personal voice in other genres of nonfiction because, in the writing act, the autobiographer's voice is engaged in the creation of itself as both subject and object through language, creating a self who lives beyond the personal landscape, who now lives in history's flow. Richard Wright in Black Boy informs us about this subtle act when he says "Each event spoke with a cryptic tongue. And the moments of living slowly revealed their coded meanings" (Richard Wright. Black Boy. New York: NAL, 1951. 12.).

Yet the autobiographical act always means exposing oneself to the risk of facing what such disclosure means. Writing that encourages such risk-taking and even defines itself through those risks advances self-education. Through its potential for self-knowledge, autobiography defines the writer's present. For autobiographer Wallace Fowlie, "Writing is indeed a process of self-alteration. Living belongs to the past. Writing is the present" ["On Writing Autobiography." The Southern Review. 22(1986): 275].

This making of writing into an historical present happens in a number of ways. For example, what's especially striking about writing autobiography, with its reliance on memory, is how doing so enables the recovery of the voice's originating oral power through the process of privileging the author. Autobiography offers us the only prose situation where writing and speaking jostle each other for equal space and attention in their interdependency. In writing autobiography, we hold conversations with ourselves to reconstruct a present identity from the memories that emerge. We contain our pasts in language through the sounds of our voices. As we fashion our own voices within and against the voices of self and others in our culture and immediate lives, we create ourselves, as Karen LeFevre puts it, " . . . by means of inner conversations carried on with

internalized others" (Karen Burke LeFevre. Invention as a Social Act. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1987. 93.).

Writing autobiography thus offers student writers a unique experience in textuality. Since autobiography makes us listen carefully to ourselves as writers speaking at the same time we are writing, the writer simultaneously becomes protagonist and narrator and author. Eudora Welty both describes and exemplifies this subtle process in One Writer's Beginnings as she has experienced it through a lifetime of reading and writing:

> Ever since I was first read to, then started reading to myself, there has never been a line read that I didn't hear. As my eyes followed the sentence, a voice was saying it silently to me. It isn't my mother's voice, or the voice of any person I can identify, certainly not my own. It is human, but inward, and it is inwardly that I listen to it. It is to me the voice of the story or the poem itself. The cadence, whatever it is that asks you to believe, the feeling that resides in the printed word, reaches me through the reader-voice. I have supposed, but never found out, that this is the case with all readers--to read as listeners--and with all writers, to write as listeners. It may be part of the desire to write. The sound of what falls on the page begins the process of testing it for truth, for me. Whether I am right to trust so far I don't know. By now I don't know whether I could do either one, reading or writing, without the other.
>
> My own words, when I am at work on a story, I hear too as they go, in the same voice that I hear when I read in books. When I write and the sound of it comes back to my ears, then I act to make my changes. I have always trusted this voice.
>
> (One Writer's Beginnings. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984. 11-12.)

In her journal response to this passage in One Writer's Beginnings, a student wrote that "She [Eudora Welty] said something to the effect of voice being in its own tone describing itself as it reveals the story you are reading. The voice inside your head while you read is not your own or anyone else's that you know because it is its own unique being within the relationship between yourself & the thing you are reading about" (Shelley, March 9, 1988). I think "writing" could stand in the stead of "reading" in the above sentence or, at least, alongside, because, in addition to the interplay and interdependency between writing and speaking in autobiography, reading the emerging text of the self, as Welty points out, becomes such a constant and integral part of the autobiographical act that voice always inserts itself there as well.

When we encourage our students to shape and share their own experience through writing, we encourage them to listen to themseves in the act of creating those "shades of deeper

meaning." As a result, when students develop a voice they can identify as their own through its embodiment in a piece of writing, they are well on their way toward the empowerment that enables them to meet the constant challenges of reading and writing. One student expressed his desire for such an empowerment while remembering what the late James Baldwin once said to him during a campus visit in the spring of 1986: "Voice is almost another person. It is an other person. Not really so different from myself, but separate from myself is my voice. My voice is something I yearn for. James Baldwin told Maureen Leak and me, when he was here, to quit looking for our voices and they would be there" (Peter, March 9, 1988).

In autobiography, students have managed to get inside the act of writing so that they <u>are</u> their texts: the writer in the process of becoming her own rhetorical product. It is from this heady confluence of the self and language that autobiography arises. And because autobiography depends on the "inner conversations" with the self and "internalized others," writing autobiography can become a means to self knowledge that serves as a valuable adjunct to academic writing. It's not surprising that the word "education" continues to reoccur in the titles of autobiographies from <u>The Education of Henry Adams</u> to the more recent <u>A Romantic Education</u> by Patricia Hampl. Even when the word "education" does not get <u>named</u> in the title, the hunger to learn and to know oneself in the context of the world and others drives the narrative: "Why am I as I am?," as Malcolm X puts it to us and to Alex Haley (<u>The Autobiography of Malcolm X</u>. 150).

In answer to such naked expressions of the desire to know, Janet Varner Gunn makes a strong case that the kind of "narrative behavior" implicit in autobiography through speaking one's life is a "cultural or 'worldly' transaction and not simply a self-referential one," one "that delves into time in order to take up the problem of depth" (<u>Autobiography: Towards A Poetics Of Experience</u>. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982. 38.). For example, in his autobiographical essay "On the Promise of The Promised Land," UVM student Amos reflects on what his journey from a neighborhood school in Riverdale to Junior High School 141 reveals for his growing awareness of his Jewishness:

> Now the teachers' roll-books were filled with all sorts of strange names. Names that I'd heard on television, names I couldn't pronounce, and others like Williams or Jones that I thought only people checking into hotels used.
>
> My friends became Tardibuono, Ryan, Peruthers, Provenzano, and Maloney. The days on the baseball field after school became a memory in a different life. There were more than pop-flies in this new world to catch.

Amos's voice, in the act of naming others, creates itself by situating the speaking voice in time and place: he exists in the present by referring to a past and by inferring a future. In this writing present, Amos enters into and activates his own

education by doing what Paolo Freire says students should be encouraged to do: "To exist, humanly, is to name the world and change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action--reflection" (Pedagogy of the Oppressed. Intro. Richard Schaull. New York: Seabury, 1970. 76.). Through autobiography, Amos undergoes such a self-alteration, revealed in his account of his last evening in Israel:

> As the sun was going down over the Mediterranean, I watched a man walk the beach as two young girls, apparently his daughters, walked along side. The man, around thirty-five, was dressed in his reserve army uniform. He was doing guard duty on the beach and his Uzi sub-machine gun hung from his shoulder like another appendage. One daughter held his left hand and the other, the smaller of the two, held the nozzle of his gun as the three proceeded past us. The beauty of the sunset juxtaposed with this image and the contradiction of Israel lay before me to inspect as our food sizzled on the sand-covered grill. (Amos, 1985)

In that same vein of appropriating knowledge through reflection, here is the way another student expressed her experience with writing autobiography (in an afterword to an exploration of her relationships with her father and her step-father):

> Autobiography isn't just hard--it's heart. Heart and soul. At first thought, autobiography may seem like one of the simpler forms of nonfiction writing. After all, you're an expert on the subject, right? And you're the only one who is. Only you have the correct answers to the questions and only you know what really happened when. No tough nights in the library doing research, no pounding the proverbial pavements in search of an informed opinion or interview. It's all in your head.
>
> Virginia

Virginia's opening observations deserve attention. First, she recognizes the complex intersection of the ambivalent nature of representation in language: "heart and soul," "correct answers" to "what happened when." Its [representation's] modes and meanings lie deep inside the metaphorical body of language that the writer must inscribe in order to produce the text that represents herself. Virginia also notes autobiography's deceptive simplicity: "autobiography may seem like one of the simpler forms of nonfiction writing . . . ." She has discovered by doing what Sidonie Smith says about autobiography: "This genre, apparently so simple, so self-evident, so readily accessible to the reader, is ultimately as complex as the subject it seeks to capture in its representation and as various as the rhetorical expressions through which, with the mediation of

language, that subjectivity reads itself into the world" (A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987, 3). Creating a writing identity becomes the writer's most urgent task, and it is this process of creating a writing identity that moves the student from the margins of the educational experience toward the center--toward "heart and soul."

Yet as Virginia goes on to describe the increasing complications she faced fixing memory through language during the often painful process of writing "No Fathers For Christmas," she reveals herself through a hard-won unique relationship with a language of the self that discloses the anguished repetition of loss in her life. Here's Virginia's final observation on writing about the precariousness of memory's "kinship with the imagination" (to use Patricia Hampl's way of putting it in A Romantic Education, 5):

> But that's autobiography. Sometimes it sucks. Sometimes it stinks and you can't take it anymore and you want to throw the whole thing out the window and go to the library and do some nice, safe research for a change. But you can't--you're caught in autobiography, and it's the story of your life.

In these final words, Virginia recognizes the power of language to appropriate the self in ways that forever transform the interrelationships between subject and object. Perhaps she can never engage in the material reality of the university education with its emphasis on research as a cool object in quite the same way.

Certain invention tools are particularly useful for students writing autobiography, especially as they encourage those "inner conversations" with "internalized others" to take place. The main technique is the leading question or rather sequence of questions that act primarily to stir the memory much as the analyst does by posing questions to disclose the self. For years I have given students in freshman and advanced nonfiction writing classes an autobiographical questionnaire to generate raw material in their journals. Then they fashion portions of that material into a shape that enters the flow of history as a public text, learning how difficult it is to deal with "the problem of the material not standing still long enough for you to tack it down onto the page. Or the keyboard." as one of my students recently observed.

Here is the questionnaire I currently distribute, although there are almost endless possibilities for variations and additions:

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WRITING AUTOBIOGRAPHY
Mary Jane Dickerson (Adapted from David Huddle's "Questionnaire For An Autobiographical Portrait")

The following questions are designed to help you explore the implications and connections that may exist between you and the

people, places, and events that have made up your life. Since this list only contains a few possibilities, add questions as you go. The purpose of this assignment is to provide you with a body of material in your journal from which you can shape a finished autobiographical essay. Be alert to what might happen, to where these questions might lead you. Provide as much detail through descriptive language and visual scene as you can in each question. Make the whole stand as a rough draft.

1) What physical traits (face, hands, feet, body gestures, ways of walking, talking, wearing clothes) do you see in yourself? What do you identify as your pleasing/displeasing characteristics?

2) What are your main habits? Life patterns? Tastes in music/ books/movies/friends? What do these contribute to your life?

3) Describe the major landscapes (interior and exterior) of your life so far, the main place(s) you associate with your childhood, the place you live now. How do you respond to these?

4) Describe your mother and father as concretely as possible. What particular senses and/or physical objects do you associate most strongly with each of your parents?

5) What other members of your family have had a profound influence on you? Provide visual scenes and details of these people. Most important person outside the family? Provide details.

6) What is your earliest recollection? Be as detailed as possible. Other early memories? What events were most important in passing from childhood to adulthood? Before starting to school? Elementary education, high school? Render scenes as vividly as possible.

7) What are your major fears and how have they affected you? Major pleasures? Recurrent and memorable dreams? Trace these back into childhood as far as you can.

8) What are your attitudes toward money, sex, violence, love, family life, food, animals, etc? How do these affect your life?

9) What about your character and personality are you in most conflict about and why? What do you identify as those things that cause you to act as you do? What are your ambitions? Obstacles?

10) What kinds of jobs have you held and how have they affected your ambitions, your attitudes toward people associated with them?

11) What are your most deeply held secrets, the reasons for these? Most cherished memories? Why you've held onto them?

12) What are the major issues in your life? What choices are open to you?

Impressed with what my students have accomplished for years in writing autobiography generated from such questions, I have experimented with having them respond to their reading of literature through writing autobiography rather than exclusively through the critical essay. The following questionnaire provides them with an invention tool especially geared toward a kind of reader response that enables them to structure their reading through the filter of their own experience:

QUESTIONNAIRE FOR WRITING PERSONAL RESPONSES TO LITERATURE

Mary Jane Dickerson (From "Writing Personal Essays." Reading, Writing, And The Study Of Literature. Eds. Arthur Biddle and Toby Fulwiler. New York: Random House, forthcoming 1988.)

These questions are designed to help you explore the implications and connections that may exist between the poems, short stories, novels, nonfiction, and plays that you read and the material of your own life. They are especially designed for the kind of experimental and wide-ranging thinking on paper the journal encourages. By consciously considering works of literature within the specific story of your own experiences, you give yourself a larger frame of reference for structuring a literary essay than you might otherwise allow yourself--the shape of your life gains in significance as you measure it against the others you read about. Write through these questions as they are appropriate to your reading assignments so that you have a whole body of material to draw on for a personal essay in response to one of the literary works we are studying.

1) Is there any dominant physical trait, gesture, or feature in a character that gives you special insight into yourself? Of others close to you? How does this recognition affect your response to the character? the work?

2) Is there a character who comes close to being like you in important ways? Describe the similarities.

3) What physical objects in your reading do you associate with yourself, your parents, or other family members? What does their appearance make you think about?

4) What things that you are most passionate about appear in your reading? How does this recognition affect your response?

5) What of your major fears do you also find in literary characters? What inhibitions or desires?

6) What patterns or events or motivations in your own life are reflected in the literature you are reading? What similarities and/or differences are there in the events selected?

7) Which place or setting (interior, landscape, street, building) in your reading do you identify with most and why?

8) What have you found most disturbing or disquieting (or pleasurable and satisfying?) about what you are reading? Why?

9) What connections do you see between some aspect of political and social life in the present and political and social life in a work written earlier? How do you see the past affecting the present in your own life? in the characters' lives?

10) What is your earliest memory of reading or being read to? Do you remember the book's title? What are your favorite books and the ones that remain most vividly a part of you? How might these earlier reading experiences have affected your responses to literature in the present?

The resulting autobiographical essay resembles the human voice talking just as the mind works--in a natural outpouring without the more systematic ordering of ideas usually associated with literary criticism. Students can, therefore, combine what they think with who they are in the process of creating a text that represents the speaking self within the written world of the literary imagination.

Student Charles Baraw took full advantage of the intersection of memory and imagination to develop an essay he called "Purgatory" in which he writes his own autobiography against reading Virginia Woolf's A Room Of One's Own and Dante's Divine Comedy. He examines his own relationships with and attitudes toward women through his responses to the constant sound of Virginia Woolf's voice. The autobiographical essay takes on the shape of a dialogue between aspiring male writer and authoratative female writer--a kind of lesson of the master as mistress, with Baraw in the role of Dante, Woolf in the role of Virgil:

> Virginia Woolf, with her casual yet firm voice, seemed to be offering her hand to anyone who was willing to undertake the journey. Convinced I would not reach the end without her as my guide, I took hold of her hand. Mine was sweaty.
>
> No sooner had we begun that Virginia asserted, "Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact . . . . I need not say what I am about to describe has no existence."
>
> I squeezed her hand tighter--no existence--for she deemed the earth below my feet to be imaginary, and it sank away. Before my vertigo subsided, I found we were walking along the venerable turf of Oxford University surrounded by its ancient buildings, sacred churches, and revered libraries--this was something of a comfort.

In this excerpt, we can see how Charles Baraw makes use of the imagined experience to mingle with details of his reality and the language of Woolf's text to organize meaning into a text of his own.

Creating a voice of one's own in autobiography, as I have described it through what both professional and student writers have to say, means that we must identify and grapple with the many relationships that exist between the self and others, and how others, in turn, affect the development of the emerging self. It's as if the questioning processes offered as invention technique for writing autobiography emphasize the developing self within the social contexts implicated in family, friends, education, and work. Such a conscious rendering of the autobiographer's voice can create a memorable educational experience, one that moves students from being marginal recipients of knowledge--bound up in the texts of others--toward becoming participants in textual production as they speak in voices of their own caught in the textuality of the self that we call autobiography.

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# A Voice of One's Own: Creating Writing Identities

## Abstract

When students write from personal experience, they consciously begin to shape their identities in one direction or another. Autobiography offers the potential to tap rich resources and to establish valuable relationships between the young writer's emerging sense of self and the rhetorical structures he or she encounters in reading and writing. Writing teachers can assist in this development of each writer's sense of self--and consequent development of voice--through open ended invention strategies such as an autobiographical questionnaire. This paper will describe those strategies and illustrate some of the resulting writers as their voices emerge into a larger social context involving others. Writing from and about the self enables student writers to begin to distinguish their voices from other members of interpretive communities.